

Archdiocese of Southwark



Holy Land Ecumenical Pilgrimage 2020

I'll never forget the first time I entered Jerusalem. As our coach approached the holy city, I joined in saying the words of the psalm that pilgrims were already saying for many centuries before the time of Jesus. 'I rejoiced when I heard them say, "Let us go to God's house", and now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.' I was making the journey, along with five other recently-ordained priests, in our final year of studies in Rome, along with our seminary Spiritual Director. The psalm was already familiar to us, through saying the Divine Office – that selection of psalms and other, mainly Scriptural, texts – which is the official daily prayer of the Church. It was quite an emotional moment for us, feeling that we were somehow inserted into a tradition that has meant so much to so many people, stretching back over so many generations.

This experience came back to me with particular vividness recently, as I worked with a planning group for a new pilgrimage to take place from 3rd to 10th March 2020. This is being organised by our cathedral of St George's, along with Southwark Cathedral, our Anglican neighbour down the road at London Bridge – though we're also expecting to attract pilgrims from other parishes around our two dioceses.

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Both cathedrals have plenty of experience with pilgrimages, with the Holy Land – and, perhaps even more important, with the Christian communities who live in Israel and Palestine. Bishop Christopher is one of the Anglican members of the 'Holy Land Co-ordination' group that is organised by our Catholic Bishops' Conference. Led by Bishop Declan Lang of Clifton diocese, they describe the purpose of their annual visit: in order to 'remind the "living stones" of the Christian communities in the Holy Land that they are not forgotten by their brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.' Canon Richard Hearn, our Cathedral Dean, is a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre – an organisation which is similarly very supportive of local Christians.

The pilgrimage will start with four nights in Jerusalem, which brings to mind many scenes, particularly the view of the city from the Mount of Olives. I also remember our visit to the monastery at Gethsemane, when it was my turn to preside at Mass. About halfway through, we had a power cut and all the lights went out. All we could do was to wait, while a number of monks scurried around lighting candles around the church, so that we could continue with the Mass. Visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was very special, of course. Though it was very crowded and our group only had a limited time, I was able to go back on my own another time, where I found a corner in which to pray quietly, while the pilgrims came and went around me.

From Jerusalem we will go to Galilee for three nights. On a trivial note, I remember the time we went to an Arab sweet stall at the market in Nazareth. I have a vivid memory of our Spiritual Director tucking into one of the honey cakes – and then realising that he'd got sticky honey all up his sleeve! But my main memory is of just looking out over the Sea of Galilee and being able to get an impression of the setting of so many of the scenes in the Gospels. It always puzzled me that what is only a very large lake could have the sort of storms that nearly sank the disciples' boat. I learned that there are indeed some strange weather effects, caused by the way the winds interact with the mountains surrounding the lake. One guide told me that, even with a motor boat, there was one occasion when a storm came up so quickly that they were only just able to get to land before it hit them.

I do hope you may be able to join us on the pilgrimage next year. I've no doubt that, if you do, you will find it a very moving and totally unforgettable experience.



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